

Testimony

of the

National Cattlemen's Beef Association

to the

**Subcommittee On Consumer Affairs, Foreign Commerce, And Tourism
of the
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation**

Presented by

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Producer-directed and consumer-focused, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association is the trade association of America's cattle farmers and ranchers, and the marketing organization for the largest segment of the nation's food and fiber industry.

Introduction

I would like to thank the Chairman and members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Chuck Schroeder and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. NCBA is a producer-directed and consumer-focused trade association representing America's cattle farmers and ranchers. I hope that my testimony today can help this body to take the appropriate action to ensure that American consumers continue to have the safest and most wholesome food supply in the world.

NCBA hopes that this hearing and others like it will help us clearly point out the facts regarding BSE to both our consumers around the world and our producers here in the United States:

- No cases of BSE have ever been identified in the US.
- The US government, with full cooperation of the US beef industry, continues to take actions to prevent the introduction of the agent that causes BSE

The U.S. Government, at the request of beef producers and consumers, invests 100's of millions of dollars annually to prevent the introduction of foreign animal diseases such as BSE. The United States must continue to set the world standard for research, inspection, surveillance and food safety monitoring systems to instill confidence in our beef customers, both domestically and abroad.

Background

NCBA has been involved in making sure that the U.S. continues to be free of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) for a number of years. NCBA would first remind Senators that BSE has been and remains a foreign animal disease. American consumers have been bombarded with the scenes from the United Kingdom, almost on a daily basis in every form of media for months. While the US needs to learn from the crisis in Europe, NCBA's focus continues to be on keeping the U.S. and North America free of BSE. We believe it is vital that U.S. consumers are assured that their beef supply continues to be safe and BSE free.

A recent consumer survey conducted on behalf of the beef industry indicates that consumer confidence in beef's safety has actually increased despite the fact that 81% of consumers have heard of BSE since the fourth quarter of 2000. The NCBA believes that current high consumer confidence in our beef system is not an accident. It is the result of industry and government efforts to insist on science-based measures and decisions to keep our industry free from disease and our consumers confident in the wholesomeness of our product.

The absence of BSE in this country is due to great and positive cooperation between the public and private sector. The American cattle industry and the US government have been working together for more than a decade to keep BSE out of the United States and North America and keep it from spreading

if it does appear. The US has taken the following actions that are fully supported by all facets of the beef industry:

1. Import ban of all products that could contain the BSE agent from all countries with cases of BSE.
2. Ban on the feeding of ruminant derived feed products to ruminants.
3. Active BSE surveillance system targeted to the animals over 30 months and with symptoms of neurological disorders.

NCBA believes that as an industry and as a nation we can be proud of our success in keeping the U.S. cattle herd healthy and free of diseases like BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease. These three steps are keys to protecting the US beef industry and reassuring consumers that BSE is not present in the US or the US beef supply.

Import Ban

In 1989, the USDA banned the importation of all cattle and animal products that could carry the BSE agent from the United Kingdom. Cattle imported from the United Kingdom prior to this ban were traced and eliminated with the exception of 4 animals that are essentially pets. They will never enter the food supply.

In December of 1997, the USDA banned the importation of all cattle and products that could possibly carry the BSE agent from all of Europe. All cattle imported from Europe prior to this ban have been traced. None will enter the food supply and efforts are underway to purchase them and submit them to the BSE surveillance program. Since this ban was put into place, the US has stopped the importation of many products including bone china, fish food, and supplements.

Feeding Ban

In an effort to remain proactive and aggressive in our protection of the U.S. livestock industry, in 1996, NCBA asked the beef and dairy cattle sectors in the U.S. to stop feeding meat and bone meal to cattle derived from all ruminants, meaning cattle, sheep, goats, deer, elk, etc. Beef and dairy producers have worked hard to meet the challenge and have taken a number of steps to assure compliance within the industry. NCBA also asked the Food and Drug Administration to develop regulations in this regard. The FDA agreed with NCBA and new regulations went into effect on June 2, 1997. The US was the first country to take this major step before there was any evidence of the disease. Since that time, virtually all other beef-producing countries in the world have followed suit.

This adds additional protection and ensures they do not represent a risk for use in other species. Meat and bone meal is a high quality product, not any different conceptually to giving your dog a steak bone. In this case it is processed to destroy all known bacteria, viruses or spores and transformed so animals can more readily utilize these valuable and much needed nutrients.

Surveillance

The United States has had an active BSE specific surveillance program since 1989. We have always had an aggressive surveillance program for neurological disease due to the threat of Rabies. Since

the BSE surveillance program was instituted, more than 12,000 brain samples from animals old enough and with conditions that might share symptoms with BSE have been analyzed. It is important to note that these samples have been taken from cattle considered to be the highest risk of identifying BSE if it were present. Our surveillance program exceeds the international requirements set by the Office of International Epizootics, the international animal health organization linked to the World Trade Organization. Despite over 10 years of active government surveillance for the disease in the United States, not a single case of BSE—not one—has been found in the U.S.

From the beginning, the U.S. surveillance program has been ahead of its time. Starting in 1993, the diagnostic program began using an Immuno-Histo-Chemistry (IHC) method. This method is as sensitive as any system in use in the world today. It can pick up BSE more than 3 weeks prior to the animal showing any signs. All samples submitted are evaluated by both histology (how the brain looks under a microscope) and IHC.

The USDA has announced it will double the number of animals submitted to the surveillance program, a move we fully support. The current testing program gives us great confidence that we have successfully kept BSE out of the US. As a result of the steps taken to prevent BSE in the US, we are confident the animal protein by-products produced from US cattle are BSE free.

Additional Information on BSE

The BSE agent has NEVER been identified in the US or in beef. In March, the USDA held a comprehensive BSE research briefing in Beltsville, Maryland. Dr. Danny Mathews of the Veterinary Laboratory Agency in Weybridge, United Kingdom, discussed current research on the disease. It is important to note that they have reaffirmed that the ONLY tissues from cattle that carry the BSE agent are brain, spinal cord and part of the intestine. Blood from animals with BSE has NEVER been shown to carry the disease agent. Once again, they documented that beef itself NEVER carries the infectious agent, even from cows with full-blown BSE.

Given the fact that the BSE agent would exclusively be localized in the brain and spinal cord, several years ago the USDA and packing industry took steps to ensure these tissues do not inadvertently enter the human food supply. For this reason, the use of pneumatic, air-injection stunning devices has been discontinued in the U.S. and spinal cords must be completely removed in packing plants.

NCBA and the US beef industry are focused on more than just keeping the US BSE-free. We have joined with our Canadian and Mexican counterparts to develop a North American plan to keep BSE from our continent. Currently, Canada and Mexico have taken the same steps that the US has to protect their industry from introduction of the agent and its spread should it ever be found.

Suggested Congressional Action

The NCBA requests that Congress consider the following steps to continue the prevention and introduction of BSE into the US:

Science-Based Decision Making

We ask that any decisions you make be based on science. NCBA asks that you avoid decisions based on rumor and rhetoric spread by those more interested in stopping the consumption of beef and meat products than protecting the rights and needs of consumers. NCBA also urges you to avoid policy changes proposed by those seeking to accomplish political objectives that do not support the science-based animal disease firewall but would prevent the U.S. producer from operating in a global market.

Regulatory Enforcement

We must remain focused on enforcing the regulations we currently have. If we continue to do so, we will remain BSE free and our beef, dairy cattle, and consumers will be protected. Congress should provide support for state departments of agriculture, FDA and private industry to ensure 100 percent compliance with the FDA feed ban. Private industry and State partnerships with the FDA play a significant role in ensuring compliance. We know how to prevent BSE in the United States. To date, we have accomplished this important task and the U.S. remains free of BSE.

NCBA has asked that USDA, FDA and Customs officials continue to monitor their own actions and programs to look for ways to improve the firewall that protects US livestock producers and keeps the US free of the diseases of immediate concern. We request that Congress provide the resources needed by USDA, FDA and Customs to enforce the regulations that will keep our beef industry free of BSE.

Research Funding

The NCBA calls upon Congress to commit to doubling funding for agricultural research to \$2.4 billion annually over the next 5 years. This funding would include construction of a National Animal Disease Center at Ames, Iowa at a cost of \$350 million. This facility could help provide important diagnostic, monitoring, and surveillance for diseases that could infect the national livestock herd. The cost of this facility may seem high, but it would provide long-term benefits for agriculture, particularly in light of the Foreign Animal Diseases that exist around the world.

Implement Improvements Suggested by Harvard BSE Risk Assessment

USDA asked the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis to review what has been done and to assess the risk of BSE in this country. The preliminary finding of Dr. George Gray, the center's program director for food safety and agriculture confirms our belief. BSE is "not likely to occur here", according to Dr. Gray in a preliminary finding. Gray further stated that "Although our work is not complete, what we have learned so far suggest that consumers have little to fear. In our judgement, the risk that mad cow disease could happen in the USA is low, and the risk that it could spread as it did in Europe is lower still." The preliminary report from Harvard would further indicate that even if an infected animal shows up in this country, the safeguards in place would keep that animal from reaching the human food chain.

NCBA is confident that the final version of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, due out in the coming days, will be supportive of the systems for surveillance and testing already in place. We must take the steps needed to ensure that we will be ready in the future. A failure to prepare for future challenges will leave us in a precarious and unpredictable condition during some future challenge.

Discretionary Spending

The NCBA understands that there are many priorities and many interests competing for limited resources. We are hopeful that NCBA and current events have demonstrated the need for significant spending on the discretionary side. We are also optimistic that you can support these programs to the greatest degree possible given the allocation and budget constraints with which you must comply. To protect our industry from BSE, FMD and other diseases, the NCBA believes that we must commit to providing the resources needed to protect our livestock health.

Specific increases in funding will be needed for USDA's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, Agriculture Research Service, Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service, and Food Safety Inspection Service. Additionally, other areas in USDA and FDA will have new and additional needs that must be addressed to provide for any measures that may be required in the future. In recent years the United States has followed the EU model of supporting agriculture with increased levels of funding for commodity programs at the expense of many of the systems that provide support for our firewall against foreign animal disease. New losses in funding in these critical areas would undermine our ability to protect our consumers, our producers and the livestock of the United States.

Conclusion

The NCBA appreciates the opportunity to visit with you today. More information about BSE can be found at our peer-reviewed site <http://www.bseinfo.org>. BSE has been of concern to the US beef industry since it was first identified in the UK in 1986. NCBA has supported the actions that the US government has taken to protect the US beef industry and US consumers from BSE. BSE has not ever been identified in North America and we will continue to take steps to ensure that it does not occur. We will pay careful attention to the results and recommendations in the Harvard BSE Risk Assessment. NCBA looks forward to working with Congress, the Administration, BSE experts and our partners in the beef industry to make sure that all scientifically justified measures that need to be taken, are taken. The NCBA is committed to ensuring that the US continues to remain free of BSE and that the safety and health of the US beef industry and our consumers is protected.

Attachments:

1. NCBA Memo to Cattle Producers on Certification of Compliance with the FDA "Ruminant Feed Ban" Regulation
2. Livestock Owner Certificate
3. NCBA Appropriations Letter
4. Consumer Confidence in American Beef Survey, Beef Survey Summary, NCBA Statement
5. Joint Industry Statement on FDA feed ban
6. Joint North American Statement on the Prevention of BSE